FROM SECULAR ORDER TO SHADOW WARS

1970 – 2009

Essays on Intelligence, Proxies & the Secret History of the Middle East & South Asia

BY

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CHAPTER ONE

SHADOW OF
THE PEACOCK THRONE
– S A V A K –
THE SHAH OF IRAN'S
EMPIRE OF SPIES

"Fear can sustain power, but it cannot substitute for trust"

INTRODUCTION

Tehran, 1975. The boulevards glittered with imported Cadillacs and plane trees lifted from the Shah's Parisian dream. Hotels brimmed with visiting oil men; neon bled across Pahlavi Avenue; the city moved as if the future had already arrived. Flush with post-1973 oil revenues, the palace poured money into fighter jets, festivals of monarchy and concrete megaprojects [1][2]. But inside cafés the volume dropped when someone said the monarch's name. People feared the organisation that policed the unsaid: SAVAK. Its officers approved candidates, killed stories, lifted suspects at midnight and made dissent feel pointless [3][4]. This chapter shows how a modernising vision—order, speed, spectacle—produced the architecture of fear that sustained the Peacock Throne.

SAVAK — Sazeman-e Ettela'at va Amniyat-e Keshvar, or the organisation of Intelligence and National Security — was more than an intelligence agency. Established in 1957 with help from the CIA and Mossad [5][6], it became Shah's primary instrument of political control. Its remit extended far beyond espionage: it censored newspapers, vetted candidates for public office, controlled labour unions, and infiltrated universities and mosques. Above all, it instilled fear. Rumour held that in a gathering of three people, one was surely a SAVAK informer [3][4]

To understand why Shah created such a pervasive security state, one must return to the trauma of August 1953, when his throne tottered on the edge of collapse. Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, an elderly nationalist aristocrat, had electrified the country by nationalising the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, defying Britain and by extension, the West [7][5]. Initially celebrated as a champion of independence, Mossadegh soon faced crippling economic sanctions and internal strife. Britain, desperate to recover its oil interests, lobbied Washington. In the Cold War atmosphere, U.S. officials came to see Mossadegh less as a democrat and more as a potential gateway for communist influence through the Tudeh Party (Iran's communist party, founded 1941) [7][8]

The result was Operation Ajax, a CIA–MI6 covert operation that toppled Mossadegh and restored Shah [5][9][6][10]. The coup was a turning point

not only in Iranian history but in Shah's psychology. He had fled into exile, unsure if he would ever return. When CIA agents, bribed mobs, and loyal officers delivered his throne back to him, the lesson was indelible: foreign powers could rescue him, but domestic opposition could never again be allowed to grow unchecked. [7][5][9]

Shah's determination to create a permanent security apparatus flowed directly from this experience. Advisors close to him, and American intelligence officers, urged the creation of a modern organisation modelled on the FBI, MI5, and Israel's Mossad [6][10]. By 1957, SAVAK had been born [3][4]. It grew into an institution that touched nearly every corner of Iranian life.

SAVAK's presence was felt in subtle ways: newspapers pulled articles after quiet phone calls, professors avoided sensitive topics in classrooms, neighbours reported neighbours for casual remarks. Yet its presence was also brutally direct. Dissidents were seized from their homes in the middle of the night, taken to prisons such as Evin (Tehran prison notorious for political detainees), and subjected to electric shocks, beatings, and solitary confinement [3][11][4]. Few families in urban Iran did not know someone who had been questioned, detained, or at least threatened by SAVAK.

The paradox of Shah's Iran was thus visible from the outset. On the surface, the country was modernising: literacy was rising, universities expanded, women entered professions, and consumer goods flooded the market [1][2]. Beneath, a pervasive security system ensured that political life was stunted. Iran had a parliament and parties, but they were tightly controlled. Opposition movements — from the National Front to the communists, from clerical critics to student activists — found themselves harassed, infiltrated, and frequently destroyed by SAVAK [3][7][4]

Foreign allies, particularly the United States and Israel, regarded SAVAK as an asset, it a reliable partner in the Cold War, sharing intelligence on Soviet activities and on Arab nationalist movements [5][12][6]. American and Israeli officers trained its staff, praised its efficiency, and helped expand its technical capabilities. But for ordinary Iranians, SAVAK symbolised repression. Its reputation for torture, secrecy, and omnipresence made it one of the most feared institutions in the Middle East. [3][11][4]

In the 1970s, Tehran's boulevards still shone with new wealth, but whispers of discontent grew louder in mosques, universities, and factories. SAVAK's files recorded fragments of unrest, but its very success in silencing dissent blinded Shah to its depth [3][13][4]. The story of SAVAK — from its birth in the coup of 1953, through its rise as Shah's most feared institution, to its collapse in the 1979 revolution — is not just the story of a secret police. It is the story of how repression can preserve a regime for decades, yet ensure that when collapse comes, it comes suddenly and completely. [1][2][13]

The Coup That Shaped a Monarchy (1953)

To understand the security reflex that followed, the story begins with the 1953 coup that reshaped Iran's politics.

To grasp why SAVAK was created, we must begin in August 1953, when Shah's throne wobbled on the brink of collapse. The crisis centred on Mohammad Mossadegh, Iran's elected prime minister and a nationalist of aristocratic descent. Mossadegh's defining act was the nationalisation of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) in 1951, a bold assertion of sovereignty against British domination [7][5]. For decades, AIOC (British oil company nationalised by Iran in 1951) had extracted Iranian oil while returning a meagre share of profits; British officials lived in luxury compounds while Iranian workers toiled in poverty. Nationalisation electrified Iranians across the political spectrum, from liberals to communists, and made Mossadegh a hero [2]

In the West, initial admiration soon gave way to hostility. For Britain, the loss of its oil monopoly was a devastating blow, economically and symbolically [10]. London imposed a blockade, withdrew technicians, and sought to strangle Iran's economy. When Mossadegh resisted compromise, the crisis deepened. The British government appealed to Washington, first under Truman, then Eisenhower. Truman's administration had hesitated to intervene, viewing Mossadegh as a nationalist rather than a communist. But the early 1950s were a time of hardening Cold War lines. With Eisenhower in office, and the Dulles brothers — John Foster at State and Allen at CIA — wielding influence, Washington became receptive to London's arguments that Mossadegh was weak, erratic, and vulnerable to communist takeover via the Tudeh Party [7][8]

Thus was born Operation Ajax, a covert plan to remove Mossadegh and restore Shah's authority [5][9][6][10]. The CIA dispatched Kermit Roosevelt, grandson of Theodore Roosevelt, to Tehran with a suitcase of cash and instructions to orchestrate a coup [9][6]. His methods were classic Cold War covert action: bribing parliamentarians and military officers, planting stories in newspapers, funding mobs to create chaos in the streets, and coordinating with sympathetic clergy [7][5].

On 15 August 1953, Shah signed decrees dismissing Mossadegh and appointing General Fazlollah Zahedi as prime minister. But the first coup attempt collapsed. Mossadegh's supporters arrested key plotters, and Shah, panicked, fled to Rome with Queen Soraya [5][9]. For a brief moment, Mossadegh seemed triumphant. Crowds filled Tehran chanting his name, and Shah looked finished.

But Roosevelt did not give up. Over the next few days, CIA agents mobilised gangs of paid demonstrators who flooded the streets of Tehran, posing as both royalists and communists to create confusion and fear [6][10]. pro-Shah mobs clashed violently with Mossadegh's supporters. Meanwhile, army officers loyal to Zahedi moved tanks and artillery into position. On 19 August 1953, the coup reached its climax. Crowds attacked pro-Mossadegh newspapers, government buildings, and even his residence. Tanks shelled his house. By nightfall, Mossadegh's government had collapsed. He was arrested, tried, and placed under house arrest until his death years later [7][5].

Shah returned to Tehran in triumph, welcomed by orchestrated crowds and reassured by Roosevelt that his throne was secure [9][6]. To him, the lesson was clear: his survival depended not only on foreign allies but on ensuring that no opposition movement could ever again gain the strength to challenge him [3][1].

The coup was a watershed in Iranian history. It ended the experiment of parliamentary democracy, which had roots in the 1906 Constitutional Revolution, and ushered in a quarter-century of increasingly autocratic monarchy [2]. It cemented Iranian suspicion of Western powers, whose fingerprints on the coup were no secret [7][5][8]. It also revealed the decisive role that intelligence services could play in shaping politics — not just in Iran but across the global South during the Cold War [13][14].

For Shah personally, the experience was transformative. He had been timid and uncertain, doubting his own capacity to rule. His brief exile in Rome shook him deeply. The restoration of his throne by covert action convinced him of two things. First, he must align closely with Washington; the United States, unlike Britain, had the resources and power to protect him [5][6]. Second, he must create a domestic intelligence organ so formidable that no Mossadegh could rise again [3][4].

Afterward, political parties were neutered, newspapers censored, and opposition leaders jailed [1][2]. The Tudeh Party was especially targeted. Many of its officers in the military were arrested, and dozens were executed [7]. The purge decimated the organised left. The nationalist camp of Mossadegh was broken, its leaders marginalised or imprisoned. Shah emerged stronger than before, but his rule rested less on popular legitimacy and more on coercion [3][4].

Advisers urged him to institutionalise this coercion. The United States sent intelligence officers to design an Iranian equivalent of the FBI [6][8]. Israel's Mossad offered training in counterintelligence and interrogation [12]. Out of these recommendations came the plan for a new organisation that would centralise intelligence, monitor society, and answer directly to the monarch. Four years after the coup, that plan took form as SAVAK [3][4].

Looking back, the coup of 1953 was not merely a turning point in Iran's domestic politics but a defining episode of the Cold War [5][13]. For Washington, it a successful model of covert regime change that emboldened further operations in places like Guatemala (1954), Congo (1960), and Chile (1973) [14][8]. For Iranians, it a betrayal that entrenched authoritarianism. The memory of 1953 lingered, shaping nationalist and revolutionary movements for decades. When Shah finally fell in 1979, chants of "Death to America" carried with them not just anger at U.S. support for Shah but the bitter memory of Mossadegh's overthrow a generation earlier [2][13].

Thus, the origins of SAVAK were rooted in the coup, it not created in a vacuum but as a direct response to the trauma of seeing an elected government nearly sweep away monarchy. Shah, once restored, would never again risk such vulnerability. SAVAK was to be his shield against dissent, his eyes and ears in every corner of society, and, ultimately, the instrument that allowed him to confuse silence with consent [3][4].

Birth of SAVAK (1957–1960s)

From the coup's aftermath, the architecture of coercion hardened into a formal bureaucracy.

Creation of SAVAK in 1957 marked a decisive step in consolidating Shah's authority after the turmoil of the early 1950s. Its formal name — Sazeman-e Ettela'at va Amniyat-e Keshvar, or the organisation of Intelligence and National Security — reflected its broad mission. But in practice, SAVAK was not just an intelligence agency: it the political police of the Pahlavi state, designed to ensure that no opposition could threaten the throne again [3][4].

CIA and Mossad Guidance

Shah's advisers, mindful of his reliance on American support, pushed for an organisation modelled on Western intelligence. The CIA provided initial blueprints, drawing on its experience in counterespionage and internal security [6][8]. Israeli intelligence, the Mossad, played a more hands-on role. Iran and Israel, though formally distant because of Iran's membership in the Muslim world, had developed a clandestine alliance: oil flowed to Israel, while Israeli advisers trained Iranian security forces [12][6].

Iranian officers were sent to Tel Aviv for training in surveillance, interrogation, and counter-subversion. Israeli instructors visited Tehran to help establish filing systems, communication networks, and covert operational units [12][6]. The result was an agency that, while formally Iranian, bore the imprint of its foreign midwives [3][4].

General Teymur Bakhtiar and Early Expansion

The first director of SAVAK was General Teymur Bakhtiar, a ruthless and ambitious officer who had played a role in suppressing the Tudeh Party after 1953 [3][2]. Under his leadership, SAVAK expanded rapidly. Offices were opened in every province, agents recruited from the army and police, and informer networks established in universities, trade unions, and mosques. By the early 1960s, SAVAK's reach extended from the capital to the smallest towns [3][2].

Bakhtiar relished the role. He cultivated an image as Shah's enforcer, presiding over interrogations and ordering purges. His power grew so great that he began to be seen as a rival to the monarch himself. By 1961, tensions between the two men led to his dismissal. Yet the organisation he created survived and grew stronger under subsequent directors, notably General Hassan Pakravan and General Nematollah Nassiri. [3][1]

Mandate Beyond Espionage

Unlike intelligence agencies in democracies, SAVAK was not limited to gathering information about threats. Its remit extended into all aspects of public life. It censored newspapers, deciding which articles could be published. It vetted candidates for parliament and other offices, ensuring loyalty to the monarchy. It oversaw student unions, cultural organisations, and even professional associations. Its goal was not merely to monitor but to shape the political environment so that opposition never had room to breathe .[3][1][2][4]

Through a mixture of co-option and intimidation, SAVAK cultivated informants at every level of society. Teachers reported on students, shopkeepers on neighbours, clerics on congregants. This climate of suspicion bred fear and silence. Jokes circulated that in a gathering of three Iranians, one was SAVAK. The exaggeration contained a kernel of truth: surveillance was pervasive enough that few felt safe speaking openly. [3][4]

Techniques of Repression

SAVAK quickly acquired a reputation for brutality. Prisons under its control became sites of torture and psychological warfare. Survivors later recounted electric shocks applied to sensitive parts of the body, beatings on the soles of the feet (falaka (Beating of the soles of the feet as torture)), suspension from ceilings, and mock executions. One infamous device, dubbed the "Apollo chair", was a metal seat rigged with electrodes to deliver shocks. Detainees were strapped down, their heads forced back, while currents coursed through their bodies. [3][11]

These methods were not random cruelty but calculated techniques designed to break resistance. Interrogators sought not only confessions but also recantations, public declarations of loyalty that could be broadcast to

intimidate others. Torture was thus a performance as much as a punishment. [3]

Amnesty International and other groups would later document these practices in the 1970s, but even in the 1960s their reputation spread by word of mouth. Families whispered about relatives who had disappeared or emerged from prison broken. Fear of SAVAK became a central fact of Iranian political life. [11][13][4]

Shah's Reliance

For Shah, SAVAK was both a tool and a crutch. He relied on its reports as his main source of information about society. Ministers and officials often learned of his views only after SAVAK had briefed him. This direct channel deepened his isolation. Over time, SAVAK officers learned to shape their reports to please the monarch, emphasising successes and minimising failures. This created a dangerous feedback loop: Shah came to believe his rule was more secure than it, because SAVAK's very efficiency in silencing dissent prevented him from hearing its true extent. [3][1][13]

Foreign Perceptions

Abroad, SAVAK was regarded with a mixture of admiration and unease. American and Israeli officials praised its efficiency in combating communism and protecting Iran from Soviet influence. In the Cold War context, this was no small matter: Iran shared a long border with the USSR, and Western planners feared it as a potential weak link. By maintaining internal stability, SAVAK reassured allies that Iran was a dependable partner. [5][12][6][8]

Yet even among friends, SAVAK's brutality raised concerns. Reports of torture filtered out through exiles and defectors. Some U.S. diplomats privately worried that repression might radicalise the very opposition it sought to crush. Still, strategic considerations prevailed. To Washington and Tel Aviv, SAVAK was indispensable. [11][5][12][8]

The Stage Is Set

In the 1960s, SAVAK had become an institution central to the monarchy. Its agents patrolled campuses, raided opposition meetings, monitored sermons, and kept thick files on thousands of citizens, it feared, effective, and deeply woven into the fabric of Iranian governance. But it also sowed the seeds of future crisis. By silencing moderate voices, it left opposition to be carried by those willing to risk everything — radicals who would later turn to armed struggle. [3][2][13]

The stage was thus set for the next chapter of Iranian history. Shah's grand project of modernisation, the White Revolution, would provoke backlash that SAVAK could suppress but not eliminate. In crushing dissent, it would also create martyrs and exiles whose influence would endure. SAVAK had secured the monarchy for the moment, but at a profound cost: it had created a society where trust was scarce, fear pervasive, and resentment growing beneath the surface [1][2][13]

The White Revolution & Clerical Opposition

Once the throne felt secure, the monarchy pushed top-down reforms that remade society — and ignited clerical backlash.

By the early 1960s, Mohammad Reza Shah was determined to present himself not just as a monarch but as a moderniser. In 1963 he unveiled what he called the White Revolution, a sweeping programme of reforms meant to catapult Iran into modernity. Its name, "white," signified a bloodless revolution, a transformation from above rather than from below. For Shah, it a way to bypass both the old landed aristocracy and the increasingly vocal nationalist opposition, seizing the mantle of reform for the monarchy itself. [1][2]

Ambitions of the White Revolution

The White Revolution contained six key points at its launch: land reform, nationalisation of forests, sale of state enterprises to fund development, profit-sharing for workers, enfranchisement of women, and a literacy corps to bring education to rural areas. Later phases added more elements,

including health reforms, rural development initiatives, and even the "House of Equity" to adjudicate disputes. [1]

To Shah, these reforms demonstrated his progressive credentials. He presented himself as the enlightened monarch who would modernise Iran where politicians had failed. He spoke of dragging Iran into the "Great Civilization," a future where the country would stand alongside Europe and America. To foreign observers, especially in Washington, the programme looked promising: land reform in particular was praised as a way to weaken feudal landowners and prevent rural radicalism. [1][8]

Mixed Outcomes

Results were mixed. Land reform did break the power of many landlords, but peasants often received small or barren plots. Many lacked the credit or equipment to farm effectively. Instead of a prosperous new class of farmers, Iran saw a wave of rural migration. Dispossessed peasants moved to Tehran and other cities, swelling shantytowns and straining jobs and services. The literacy corps raised education levels, but graduates often had limited opportunities, fuelling discontent. [2][13]

Workers welcomed profit-sharing in theory, but in practice it poorly implemented and overshadowed by inflation. Women gained the right to vote, a major symbolic shift, but conservative clerics condemned the move as un-Islamic. Shah's reforms were sweeping, but they alienated key constituencies: landowners, traditional bazaar merchants, and much of the clergy. [3][1][2]

Clerical Backlash

The strongest opposition came from the ulama (Islamic religious scholars), the religious establishment. For centuries, clerics had wielded authority in Iranian society, mediating between rulers and people, controlling religious endowments, and providing education. The White Revolution threatened their influence. Land reform undercut clerical landholdings. Women's suffrage challenged their interpretation of Islamic law. Literacy campaigns bypassed traditional religious schools. [3][1][2]

Shah underestimated clerical resistance. He assumed modernisation would sweep away opposition. Instead, it galvanised figures like Ayatollah (Senior Shiʿa clerical title) Ruhollah Khomeini, a relatively little-known cleric in Qom (Holy city and Shiʿa learning centre in Iran) who emerged as a fiery critic. In sermons delivered in June 1963, Khomeini denounced Shah as a puppet of America and Israel, condemned the White Revolution as illegitimate, and warned that Islam was under attack. [3][1][12]

The 15 Khordad Uprising

(5 June 1963 Uprising Against The Shah)

Khomeini's speeches sparked protests in Qom, Tehran, and other cities. On 15 Khordad (5 June) 1963, demonstrations spread across the capital. Protesters clashed with police and army units; shops closed in bazaar strikes. SAVAK and the military responded with brutal force. Tanks rolled through Tehran's streets, troops opened fire, and hundreds were killed in what became known as the 15 Khordad uprising. [3][2][4]

The crackdown was swift. Khomeini was arrested and held in prison. Yet the attempt to silence him only raised his profile. Crowds gathered outside his house, demanding his release. After ten months, the regime freed him, only to exile him the following year to Turkey and later Najaf in Iraq. The intention was to remove him from the political stage. Instead, exile gave him a platform to develop his ideology and networks. [3][13]

Exile and Cassette Revolution

In Najaf, Khomeini continued to preach against Shah. His speeches were recorded on cassette tapes — a new, portable technology that revolutionised the spread of ideas. Pilgrims and students carried the tapes back to Iran, where they circulated in bazaars, mosques, and universities. The tapes became underground bestsellers, listened to in private homes and whispered about in workplaces. SAVAK tried to stop their spread, raiding shops, arresting distributors, and confiscating equipment. But the demand was insatiable. [13][4]

The more the regime tried to suppress Khomeini's voice, the more it amplified his symbolic role. By the late 1960s, he had become the embodiment of clerical opposition to Shah, even from exile. SAVAK unintentionally helped transform him from a provincial cleric into the central figure of a growing Islamist movement .[3][4]

SAVAK's Role

Throughout this period, SAVAK played a critical role in enforcing Shah's vision. Agents monitored universities, shut down dissident publications, and harassed clerics. Surveillance files swelled with reports of sermons, student meetings, and labour unrest. Torture and imprisonment became routine tools for containing dissent. [3][11][4]

Yet this repression came at a cost. By silencing moderate voices and crushing secular opposition, SAVAK ensured that clerical opposition, especially Khomeini's, gained prominence. Had the regime allowed more open political space, the opposition might have fragmented into multiple currents. Instead, SAVAK's heavy hand pushed many toward the one movement that seemed resilient: Islamism. [1][2][13]

Foreign Views

To Shah's foreign allies, the White Revolution was broadly positive. Washington praised land reform as a blow against communism. Israel valued Shah's continued alignment. But even friendly observers noted that repression was eroding legitimacy. U.S. diplomats reported growing resentment, while human rights groups began to track abuses. Still, Cold War priorities overshadowed concerns. SAVAK's efficiency reassured allies that Iran would remain a stable partner. [11][5][12][8]

Seeds of Future Crisis

By the end of the 1960s, Iran was changing rapidly. Urbanisation accelerated, education expanded, and oil revenues soared. But political space narrowed. Shah believed his throne secure, protected by oil wealth and SAVAK. Yet beneath the surface, opposition forces were regrouping. The White Revolution, meant to strengthen the monarchy, had in fact

alienated powerful groups — landowners, bazaaris (Traditional market merchants), clerics, students, and workers. SAVAK could monitor and repress them, but it could not erase their grievances [3][1][2][13][4]

The paradox deepened: the more Shah relied on SAVAK to silence dissent, the less he heard of the discontent brewing below. Reports reassured him that opposition was under control, but in reality, resentment was spreading. When the crisis finally erupted in the 1970s, it would be fuelled in part by the backlash against the White Revolution and the clerical opposition that SAVAK had tried, and failed, to extinguish. [2][13][4]

Guerrilla Struggles and Amnesty's Spotlight (1970s)

By the 1970s, repression and urban radicalism collided, drawing international scrutiny.

By the dawn of the 1970s, Iran appeared outwardly stable. Oil wealth flowed into government coffers, Tehran's skyline bristled with new towers, and Shah presided over a state that was both modernising and authoritarian. Yet beneath the surface, frustration was mounting. For younger Iranians, especially students, the political suffocation enforced by SAVAK left little room for legal dissent. Political parties were neutered, newspapers censored, and unions tightly controlled. For a generation radicalised by global anti-imperialist movements, the only remaining option seemed to be armed struggle. [3][2][13][4]

The Spark at Siahkal

On 8 February 1971, a small group of Marxist militants attacked a gendarmerie post near the Caspian town of Siahkal. Poorly armed and hastily organised, the operation was a military failure. Within days, most of the fighters were killed or captured, and those who survived were executed. But the symbolic impact was immense. For young radicals, Siahkal demonstrated that resistance was possible, it hailed as the birth of Iran's guerrilla movement, a turning point when opposition abandoned hope in reform and turned to violence. [2][13]

SAVAK responded with characteristic ferocity. It flooded the region with agents, rounded up suspects, and used torture to extract information.

Families of suspected sympathisers were harassed; villages accused of harbouring guerrillas were punished. Shah's message was clear: rebellion would not be tolerated. Yet the legend of Siahkal could not be erased. It inspired new recruits, particularly among university students. [3][4]

Rise of the MEK and Fedayeen

Two organisations came to dominate the guerrilla struggle. The Mujahedin-e Khalq (Islamist–Marxist Iranian guerrilla organisation) (MEK) blended Islam with Marxist theory, appealing to those who sought a synthesis of faith and revolutionary politics. The Fedayeen-e Khalq (Marxist–Leninist guerrilla organisation), by contrast, were Marxist-Leninist, inspired by the Cuban Revolution and Palestinian fedayeen. Both groups adopted strategies of urban guerrilla warfare: assassinations of officials, bombings of government targets, and ambushes of security forces. [2][13]

In 1972, MEK militants attempted to assassinate U.S. military advisers stationed in Tehran, drawing American attention to the insurgency. The Fedayeen carried out bold attacks on police stations and security installations. SAVAK struck back by infiltrating cells, capturing leaders, and executing them after summary trials. By 1976, much of the MEK's leadership had been destroyed, while the Fedayeen suffered heavy losses. Yet the movements did not disappear. For each martyr executed, another militant seemed to rise. Guerrilla violence became a fact of urban life in 1970s Iran. [3][13][4]

SAVAK's Counterinsurgency

SAVAK honed its counterinsurgency techniques during this period. Informers penetrated student networks; undercover agents posed as sympathisers to entrap militants. Interrogation methods grew more brutal. Prisoners were suspended from ceilings, beaten on the soles of their feet, and subjected to electric shocks. Psychological torture was common: detainees were forced to listen to the screams of relatives being tortured, or told they would be executed imminently [3][11][4]

The regime believed such methods necessary to crush what it called "terrorists." But the effect was double-edged. While SAVAK succeeded in dismantling many cells, it also deepened hatred of the monarchy. Families

of prisoners spread stories of abuse; exiles carried testimonies abroad. What had once been whispered rumours became documented evidence [11][13]

Amnesty International's Intervention

The turning point came when Amnesty International began to investigate. In 1975 and 1976, Amnesty published reports accusing Iran of systematic torture. The reports ranked Iran among the worst violators of human rights, alongside Chile under Pinochet and South Africa under apartheid. Testimonies from former prisoners described electric shocks, burning, sexual abuse, and psychological torment. Amnesty concluded that these were not isolated incidents but official policy. [11]

The reports reverberated internationally. In the United States, members of Congress questioned whether it moral to supply billions of dollars in arms to a regime accused of such abuses. In Britain and Europe, journalists highlighted Iran's dark underbelly. For a monarch who styled himself as progressive and enlightened, this was a reputational blow. [5][8][15]

Shah dismissed the accusations as exaggerations, insisting that only "terrorists" were targeted. SAVAK, he argued, was essential to defend Iran from communism. Yet the evidence was overwhelming. Released prisoners corroborated Amnesty's claims. Families of the disappeared testified. Exiled activists circulated documents and smuggled photographs. [11][13]

International Complicity

Despite the publicity, Western governments continued to support Shah. The Nixon Doctrine, unveiled in 1969, had made Iran the pillar of U.S. strategy in the Gulf after Britain's withdrawal "east of Suez." Washington poured arms into Iran, making it one of the largest buyers of American weaponry. U.S. advisers trained Iranian pilots, engineers, and security officers. SAVAK benefited indirectly, gaining access to technology and expertise. [5][8][10]

Israel, too, deepened its partnership. Despite Iran's public stance as part of the Muslim world, Shah and Israeli leaders shared a secret alliance. Iran supplied oil to Israel, while Mossad trained SAVAK officers in surveillance and counterterrorism. Both agencies exchanged intelligence on Palestinian

militants and Arab nationalist leaders. The cooperation was invisible to most Iranians, but it reinforced SAVAK's technical prowess. [12][6]

The Cult of Fear

In the 1970s, SAVAK cultivated an image of omnipotence. Agents were believed to be everywhere: in classrooms, mosques, factories, and bazaars. Iranians joked bitterly that "three men cannot gather without one being a SAVAK agent." This omnipresence was partly myth — SAVAK had perhaps 5,000 full-time officers and 20,000 informants — but the perception magnified its impact. Fear silenced criticism, kept opposition underground, and reinforced Shah's belief that society was under control. [3][4]

But the silence was deceptive. Dissidents of every ideology — Marxist, Islamist, liberal — shared a common hatred of SAVAK. The very efficiency that made it formidable also made it infamous. The organisation was not just feared; it despised. For many Iranians, SAVAK symbolised everything wrong with the monarchy: foreign dependence, repression, and arrogance. [3][2][13]

Prelude to Revolution

By 1977, Iran seemed both secure and brittle. Oil revenues funded prosperity for elites, while SAVAK kept opposition in check. To foreign observers, Shah looked unassailable. Yet beneath the surface, anger smouldered. The guerrilla campaigns had failed to topple the regime, but they had kept alive the notion of resistance. Amnesty's reports had tarnished SAVAK internationally, and within Iran, its brutality had forged a broad coalition of enemies. [11][5][13]

The paradox was stark: SAVAK's strength was also its weakness. By silencing moderate dissent, it ensured that opposition would take radical forms. By instilling fear, it created a society where resentment could not be expressed until it exploded. The stage was set for the mass uprisings of the late 1970s .[3][13][4]

The Gathering Storm (1977–1979)

Economic strain and a widening legitimacy gap now met mass mobilisation in the streets.

By the late 1970s, Iran under Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi appeared, at first glance, to be thriving. Oil revenues, especially after the 1973 oil shock, poured into the state treasury. Tehran gleamed with new highways, luxury hotels, and imported consumer goods. Shah boasted of turning Iran into the "Japan of the Middle East," and his regime spent billions on cutting-edge weaponry from the United States. Yet beneath this surface prosperity, resentment festered. SAVAK's pervasive surveillance had silenced public dissent, but it could not erase private bitterness. As the decade wore on, the contradiction between glittering modernisation and authoritarian repression widened into a chasm. [1][2][13][8]

Economic Strains and Social Frustrations

The oil boom of the 1970s enriched the state but destabilised society. Inflation soared as money flooded the economy. Rural migration swelled urban slums, straining housing and services. Corruption among elites, conspicuous consumption by the royal family, and the widening gap between rich and poor fed popular anger. SAVAK monitored protests and strikes, but often reported to Shah that matters were under control. [1][2][13]

For the middle classes, rising education levels created expectations that the regime could not meet. University graduates struggled to find jobs. Intellectual life was stifled by censorship. Workers, promised profit-sharing and rising wages, instead faced inflation that eroded earnings. By 1977, frustration crossed class lines: peasants, workers, students, bazaar merchants, and professionals all had reasons to grumble. [2][13]

The Deaths of Shariati and Mostafa Khomeini

Two deaths in 1977 became catalysts for mobilisation. Ali Shariati, a charismatic intellectual, had fused Shi'a Islam with revolutionary theory in ways that inspired students and radicals. He died in London in June 1977,

officially of a heart attack, but many Iranians suspected SAVAK's hand. His death turned him into a martyr, his writings circulating more widely than ever. [13]

Later that year, Mostafa Khomeini, the son of the exiled Ayatollah, died suddenly in Najaf. Again, suspicion fell on SAVAK. Though evidence was lacking, perception mattered more than proof. His funeral in Iran became a political demonstration, and the mourning rituals associated with Shi'a tradition amplified the impact. Every forty days, new commemorations were held, each drawing larger crowds. SAVAK's attempts to limit these gatherings only highlighted its role as the regime's enforcer. [3][13][4]

Carter's Human Rights Agenda

Meanwhile, international pressures shifted. U.S. President Jimmy Carter, inaugurated in January 1977, emphasised human rights in foreign policy. Iran, long a strategic ally, came under scrutiny. Shah, eager to maintain his relationship with Washington, loosened restrictions. Some political prisoners were released. Censorship was relaxed, and opposition newspapers re-emerged. [5][8][15]

The results were paradoxical. Instead of calming dissent, liberalisation exposed the depth of anger. Freed activists quickly reorganised. Newspapers published scathing critiques of corruption and repression. Once-muted voices now shouted. SAVAK, accustomed to a monopoly of control, was unprepared for the surge of open dissent. [13][4]

The Spark in Qom

In January 1978, the government allowed the publication of an article in the newspaper Ettelaat attacking Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini as a foreign agent and a debauched cleric. The piece backfired spectacularly. Theology students in Qom protested, clashing with security forces. Several were killed. Their funerals became protests, which in turn triggered more funerals forty days later. This cycle of mourning and mobilisation spread across Iran, turning local incidents into a national movement. [13]

SAVAK documented the unrest but underestimated its scale. Reports often emphasised that demonstrations were small or disorganised. Shah,

reassured, hesitated to take drastic measures. In reality, opposition was gaining momentum, drawing in secular liberals, nationalists, and Islamists alike. [3][13][4]

Black Friday

The tipping point came on 8 September 1978, remembered as Black Friday. Tens of thousands gathered in Tehran's Jaleh Square to protest. The regime declared martial law and deployed troops. When demonstrators refused to disperse, soldiers opened fire. Hundreds were killed in hours of shooting. [13][15]

The massacre aimed to crush dissent; instead, it radicalised the movement. Many Iranians concluded that compromise with Shah was impossible. Strikes swept through factories, oil fields, and government offices. The bazaar shut down in solidarity. By autumn, Iran was paralysed. [13][8][15]

SAVAK's Waning Power

Ironically, the very organisation that had symbolised Shah's power now revealed his weakness. SAVAK had long cultivated an aura of omnipotence, but as protests grew into the millions, it appeared powerless. Its informer networks faltered under the sheer scale of unrest. Its torture chambers, once effective in silencing individuals, could not intimidate masses marching in the streets. Worse, SAVAK's reputation for brutality made reconciliation impossible. Opposition groups refused to negotiate, convinced that the secret police would never reform. [3][11][4]

Inside the agency, morale declined. Some officers doubted Shah's will to survive. Others feared retribution if the monarchy fell. Files piled up in headquarters, documenting unrest but offering no solutions. Shah continued to demand reassurance, and SAVAK's reports often minimised the threat, feeding his detachment from reality. [3][1][13]

Collapse Approaches

By late 1978, the revolution had gathered unstoppable momentum. Millions marched in coordinated demonstrations. Oil strikes crippled state revenues. Religious leaders, intellectuals, and secular politicians found common cause.

Shah vacillated between conciliation and repression, pleasing no one. [2][13]

In January 1979, he left Iran, ostensibly for medical treatment, but in reality into exile. Crowds celebrated in the streets. SAVAK offices were stormed, files seized, and agents hunted down. The organisation that had once embodied fear collapsed almost overnight. Its aura of omnipotence evaporated, replaced by a rush of vengeance. [13][15]

Collapse and Afterlife

Revolution dismantled SAVAK in name, even as its methods outlived the monarchy.

The year 1979 marked the dramatic unravelling of the Pahlavi monarchy, and with it, the collapse of the feared organisation that had sustained it: SAVAK. For more than two decades, SAVAK had been Shah's shield and sword, the institution that silenced dissent, infiltrated opposition, and cultivated a culture of fear. Yet when the revolution erupted in full force, its power melted away with astonishing speed. [3][4]

The Storming of SAVAK

As Shah departed Iran in January 1979, revolutionary momentum surged. Demonstrators took to the streets by the millions, demanding an end not only to monarchy but also to the secret police that had terrorised them. SAVAK headquarters in Tehran and regional offices across the country became targets. Protesters stormed buildings, seizing files that detailed decades of surveillance. Documents revealed the names of informers, reports on sermons and student meetings, transcripts of interrogations, and chilling accounts of torture. [13][4][15]

These files became both evidence and weapons. Some were published in newspapers, exposing the extent of repression. Others were used to identify agents who had once operated in the shadows. Suddenly, SAVAK officers found themselves hunted. Some were lynched by mobs, others arrested and put on trial in revolutionary courts. A few managed to flee abroad, seeking asylum in Europe or the United States. [13][4]

Vengeance and Retribution

The fall of SAVAK unleashed a wave of vengeance. Revolutionary tribunals, often led by clerics with little legal training, sentenced former agents to death. Executions were swift, sometimes carried out within hours of sentencing. Families of victims demanded justice, and in many cases, retribution blurred into revenge. For decades, SAVAK had operated above the law; now its officers were at the mercy of revolutionary justice. [13][4]

The ferocity of the purge was fuelled not only by anger at repression but also by the perception that SAVAK was an extension of foreign powers. Its training by the CIA and Mossad made it, in the eyes of many Iranians, a symbol of national humiliation. To destroy SAVAK was not only to topple a secret police but to strike at the foreign influence that had propped up the monarchy. [3][12][6]

Continuity Under a New Regime

Yet the irony of the revolution soon became apparent. While the Islamic Republic denounced SAVAK as a tool of tyranny, it also inherited its methods. Within months, new intelligence structures emerged. The Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) and the intelligence arm of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps)) assumed the functions once performed by SAVAK. [3][4]

The files seized in 1979 became valuable assets. Networks of informers were reactivated, now serving clerical rather than royalist masters. Techniques of interrogation, surveillance, and infiltration remained largely the same. Torture, once condemned as the hallmark of Shah's regime, reappeared under the new rulers. Dissidents — secular liberals, leftists, and later even Islamists critical of clerical dominance — found themselves imprisoned and abused. [3][11]

The Language of Justification

What changed was the language of justification. Under Shah, repression was defended as necessary to protect the monarchy and modernisation. Under the Islamic Republic, it justified as the defence of Islam and revolution. But

for the victims, the experience was hauntingly similar: midnight arrests, blindfolds, interrogations, and cells in Evin Prison. [3][11]

Amnesty International, which had denounced SAVAK in the 1970s, would later issue reports on abuses under the Islamic Republic. The continuity was undeniable. Iran's rulers had changed, but its intelligence culture — authoritarian, secretive, and repressive — endured. [11][4]

Exile and Memory

For former SAVAK agents who escaped abroad, life was shadowed by stigma. In Europe and America, they lived quietly, often under assumed names. Few spoke openly, fearing retribution or shame. Iranian exiles, many of whom had suffered under SAVAK, regarded them with contempt. Some agents attempted to justify their actions as service to the state during a dangerous Cold War. Others remained silent, unwilling to revisit the past. [3][4]

Inside Iran, SAVAK became a symbol in collective memory. School textbooks, revolutionary speeches, and films depicted it as the embodiment of tyranny. For a generation, "SAVAK" was a byword for repression. Yet the demonisation sometimes obscured the reality that its structures had been absorbed and perpetuated by the new regime. [3][4]

Lessons of Collapse

The collapse of SAVAK carried important lessons. First, fear is a brittle foundation for legitimacy. For decades, SAVAK had silenced dissent, but when the dam broke, it broke catastrophically. Second, repression without accountability blinds rulers. SAVAK's reports, tailored to please Shah, misled him into believing his throne secure. Third, institutions of repression often outlive regimes. While SAVAK as an organisation vanished, its methods survived, recycled by successors. [3][1][13][4]

Legacy

Today, historians debate SAVAK's precise scale and effectiveness. Some argue it smaller and less omnipotent than legend suggests, relying heavily on the perception of ubiquity. Others emphasise its central role in

sustaining authoritarian rule. What is clear is that SAVAK left a deep imprint on Iranian political culture. It fostered mistrust, silenced dialogue, and created a legacy of trauma that shaped both the revolution and the regime that followed. [3][2][13][4]

The afterlife of SAVAK thus complicates the narrative of 1979. The revolution was supposed to be a rupture, a break with tyranny. In reality, it also a continuity. Shah's secret police may have been destroyed, but its ghost lived on in new institutions, new prisons, and new interrogators. For Iranians, the midnight knock on the door remained a terrifying possibility — proof that regimes may change, but authoritarian habits are harder to kill. [3][11][4]

Analysis & Legacy

What follows distils how intelligence and power interacted — and why the system ultimately failed.

The story of SAVAK is not only about Iran but also about the paradoxes of authoritarian rule in the Cold War era. For over two decades, SAVAK preserved Shah's throne by silencing dissent, yet in doing so it also sowed the seeds of revolution. Its legacy is therefore best understood in three interlocking dimensions: its domestic role, its international entanglements, and its enduring imprint on Iran's political culture. [3][2][13][4]

The Paradox of Repression

Domestically, SAVAK embodied the paradox of repression, it extraordinarily effective at silencing opposition in the short term. Political parties were neutered, student unions infiltrated, and trade unions brought under state control. Torture instilled fear; censorship stifled debate. For many years, it seemed Shah had achieved what his father had attempted: a modernising autocracy immune to challenge. [3][1][2][4]

But repression created illusions. By silencing moderate critics, SAVAK left the field to radicals who could not be co-opted. By censoring newspapers and crushing protests, it ensured that grievances accumulated unexpressed, only to explode later. And by tailoring reports to please Shah, SAVAK blinded him to the depth of discontent. What he heard from his intelligence

service was not the truth of Iranian society but an echo of his own assumptions. [3][1][13]

The result was a brittle stability. Iran appeared orderly and modern, but beneath lay reservoirs of anger. When they burst in 1978–79, they overwhelmed a regime that had mistaken silence for loyalty. [2][13]

SAVAK's history cannot be separated from its international entanglements. The agency was midwifed by the CIA and Mossad, trained with Western expertise, and praised as a bulwark against communism. In Washington, Tehran was seen as the "gendarme of the Gulf," the reliable ally who secured oil routes and countered Soviet influence. For Israel, Iran was a crucial backdoor ally, sharing intelligence on Arab states and Palestinian militants. [5][12][6][8][10]

This cooperation gave SAVAK technical strength. Its wiretapping equipment, surveillance techniques, and interrogation methods reflected foreign input. But it also tainted the organisation's legitimacy. To many Iranians, SAVAK was not just a domestic oppressor but a foreign puppet. The belief that torture chambers were "Made in America" fuelled anti-Americanism, shaping the rhetoric of the 1979 revolution and the hostage crisis. [3][11][2][13]

The paradox extended to human rights discourse. Western governments were well aware of SAVAK's abuses. Amnesty International's reports of the mid-1970s shocked public opinion, and U.S. diplomats privately acknowledged torture. Yet arms sales and strategic considerations outweighed these concerns. By sustaining Shah, the West also sustained SAVAK, becoming complicit in its methods. [11][5][8][10][15]

The Cold War Context

The Cold War framed SAVAK's existence. Iran shared a long border with the Soviet Union and was seen as vulnerable to communist penetration. To Washington, preventing Iran from falling into Moscow's orbit was paramount. To Shah, being America's ally was both protection and insurance. SAVAK's primary justification was therefore the threat of communism, embodied in the Tudeh Party and guerrilla groups. [2][8][10]

Yet the communist threat was often exaggerated. By the late 1960s, the Tudeh had been decimated. Guerrilla movements were small and fragmented. SAVAK's reports, however, emphasised the danger to justify its budget and powers. This overemphasis may have skewed policy, diverting attention from the real source of opposition: Islamists, bazaaris, and disillusioned middle classes. By focusing on a fading communist threat, SAVAK underestimated the rising clerical tide. [3][2][13][4]

Cultural Trauma

SAVAK's methods left deep scars on Iranian society. Torture was not just a tool of interrogation but a weapon of humiliation. Survivors described being stripped, shocked, beaten, and forced to confess falsehoods. Families of prisoners lived in fear, unsure if loved ones would return. The secrecy surrounding disappearances bred a culture of mistrust. Neighbours avoided speaking openly, lest they be reported. [3][11][4]

This trauma carried into the post-revolutionary era. When Iranians overthrew Shah, they also sought to exorcise the memory of SAVAK. Yet the continuity of repression under the Islamic Republic compounded the pain. For many, it seemed that tyranny was not a feature of one regime but a recurring pattern of Iranian governance. [3][11][4]

The Symbolism of SAVAK

Over time, SAVAK acquired symbolic power beyond its actual numbers, it never a vast organisation — estimates range from 5,000 officers and 20,000 informers at its peak — but its reputation made it seem omnipresent. Stories of torture spread faster than facts. Jokes about its ubiquity reinforced fear. The myth of SAVAK's omniscience was one of its greatest assets, but also one of its greatest liabilities. When the revolution came, the myth ensured that destroying SAVAK became a central demand. [3][2][13][4]

Lessons of History

SAVAK's legacy offers several lessons relevant beyond Iran

1. Repression breeds resistance. By silencing moderates, authoritarian regimes empower radicals. SAVAK destroyed the National Front and liberal opposition, leaving Islamists as the dominant anti-regime force. [3][2][13].
2. Intelligence without accountability distorts reality. By shaping reports to please rulers, intelligence services risk blinding them. Shah's detachment was deepened by SAVAK's selective reporting. [3][1][13].
3. Foreign support sustains but delegitimises. SAVAK's foreign training and backing gave it strength but also fuelled perceptions of dependency. The agency became a symbol of national humiliation as well as repression. [5][12][6][8][10]
4. Authoritarian methods outlive regimes. SAVAK's techniques were recycled by the Islamic Republic. Institutions may die, but practices of surveillance and torture endure. [3][11][4].

A Mirror of Authoritarianism

In the end, SAVAK was both unique and typical. Unique in its Iranian context, shaped by the 1953 coup and Shah's ambitions; typical in its role as a secret police, comparable to counterparts in Latin America, Africa, and Asia during the Cold War. Like Chile's DINA or East Germany's Stasi, it combined surveillance with terror, shaping politics through fear. [2][13]

Its fall was sudden and dramatic, but its legacy lingers. In Iranian memory, SAVAK remains the archetype of repression, invoked whenever the state overreaches. Its files, many lost or destroyed, remain a contested archive of truth and trauma. For scholars, they offer a glimpse into how authoritarian states monitor and manage society. For Iranians, they are reminders of pain. [3][2][13][4]

Continuity and Rupture

The revolution of 1979 was supposed to mark a rupture — the destruction of tyranny and the dawn of freedom. Yet the persistence of SAVAK's

methods under the Islamic Republic shows how authoritarian practices can transcend ideology. Whether justified in the name of monarchy or Islam, repression followed similar patterns. This continuity complicates the narrative of liberation, suggesting that Iran's problem was not only Shah but a deeper culture of authoritarianism. [3][11][4]

Conclusion

The rise and fall of SAVAK encapsulates the contradictions of Iran under Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. Conceived in the aftermath of the 1953 coup, nurtured with foreign assistance, and empowered as the guardian of monarchy, SAVAK became both the shield that preserved the throne and the poison that undermined it. For over two decades it succeeded in silencing dissent, controlling public life, and instilling fear. Yet its very effectiveness at repression blinded Shah to the growing reservoir of anger beneath Iran's modern façade. [3][1][2][13][4]

To Iranians, SAVAK came to symbolise not modernisation or stability but humiliation, torture, and subservience to foreign powers. In the whispered stories of torture chambers, in the sudden disappearances of neighbours, in the jokes about omnipresent informers, SAVAK represented the gulf between Shah's rhetoric of progress and the reality of authoritarianism. Its reputation was so toxic that when the revolution erupted in 1979, the destruction of SAVAK was not a by-product but a central demand. [3][11][13][4]

Yet the fall of SAVAK did not mean the end of repression. Its files were seized, its officers purged, but its methods survived. The Islamic Republic, while denouncing SAVAK as a tool of tyranny, recycled its techniques under new banners. Surveillance, censorship, and torture continued, proving that authoritarian practices often outlast regimes. [3][11][4]

The lessons of SAVAK are therefore universal. Repression can enforce silence, but silence is not legitimacy. Intelligence services can provide rulers with information, but without accountability they can also distort reality. Foreign alliances can provide strength, but at the cost of legitimacy. And authoritarian methods, once entrenched, are hard to eradicate. [3][1][2][13][4]

SAVAK's empire of spies preserved the Peacock Throne for a generation. But when collapse came, it swift, total, and irrevocable. Its legacy remains a warning: fear can sustain power, but it cannot substitute for trust. [2][13][4]

The next chapter traces how the Islamic Republic rebuilt its intelligence system — from ad hoc Komitehs and SAVAMA to the IRGC's expanding security apparatus.

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Chapter Two

Revolutionaries & Retribution

—

Intelligence in Khomeini's Islamic Republic

INTRODUCTION – FROM SAVAK TO SAVAMA[1]

The monarchy's fall dismantled one apparatus even as a new one began to coalesce. When Ayatollah (Senior Shi'a clerical title) Ruhollah Khomeini returned to Tehran on 1 February 1979, carried on the shoulders of jubilant crowds after fifteen years in exile, one of his first priorities was the destruction of the Shah's hated intelligence service. SAVAK — shorthand for Sazeman-e Ettela'at va Amniyat-e Keshvar — had for two decades symbolised the cruelty of the monarchy: surveillance, torture, disappearances, and a pervasive climate of fear [1][2].

To dismantle SAVAK was not only a practical step in securing revolutionary legitimacy, but also a symbolic act of rupture with the ancien régime. Revolutionary crowds stormed SAVAK's headquarters in February 1979, burning documents, freeing prisoners, and dragging agents before ad hoc tribunals. Some were executed within days. Khomeini and his inner circle, however, understood that while the monarchy's security apparatus could be denounced, it could not simply be abandoned. Iran in 1979 was beset by turmoil: separatist movements in Kurdistan and Khuzestan, remnants of monarchist militias, leftist guerrilla groups, and the looming spectre of a hostile West all threatened the new regime [3][4].

To survive, the revolution needed its own intelligence organs — not merely to defend borders but to police society, enforce ideological conformity, and strike fear into opponents at home and abroad. From SAVAK to SAVAMA Continuity in files and methods met a change in ideology and command. In the spring of 1979, Khomeini approved the creation of Sazeman-e Ettela'at va Amniyat-e Melli-ye Enghelab-e Eslami Iran — soon shortened to SAVAMA, later reorganised as the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS/VAJA).

Staffed in part by younger clerics and revolutionary ideologues, SAVAMA inherited many of SAVAK's files, prisons, and even techniques [3].

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[1] Post-revolution intel body preceding MOIS (Ministry of Intelligence and Security (from 1984))

Though purged of senior SAVAK officials, the continuity was unmistakable: the architecture of surveillance remained, but its mission was redefined. Where SAVAK had justified repression as protecting monarchy and modernisation, SAVAMA justified repression as safeguarding Islam and the revolution. In parallel, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps)), established by decree in May 1979, built its own intelligence wing. Unlike the more bureaucratic SAVAMA/MOIS (Iran's civilian intelligence bodies post-1979), the IRGC (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps)'s intelligence units were militant, ideological, and tied directly to the Guards' role as guardians of the revolution [5].

Khomeini deliberately fostered this duality — overlapping agencies ensured that no single organisation could dominate, and factional rivalry kept them dependent on clerical oversight.

Tehran, February 1979. Crowds poured through the gates of SAVAK headquarters, ripping files from cabinets as guards fled. On the tarmac, Khomeini had only just returned; inside ministries his allies were already dismantling the Shah's security state. SAVAK had made people whisper, vanish, confess on camera; its very name meant fear [1][2].

Yet the revolution could not live on euphoria alone. With separatists on the periphery, the MEK (Iranian Islamist–Marxist opposition group) in the streets, and foreign capitals circling, the new rulers needed an intelligence machine of their own. Within weeks, SAVAMA rose from the bones of SAVAK; within years, MOIS and the IRGC's intelligence arm turned ideology into architecture — files, prisons, networks — to police belief and crush dissent [3][5][6]. This chapter shows how rupture in creed met continuity in method, producing an apparatus that reached from Evin (Tehran prison notorious for political detainees)'s cells to embassies abroad.

By 1984, SAVAMA had been formally reorganised into the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), which remains Iran's civilian intelligence service today [6]. But in practice, the IRGC's intelligence arm grew equally powerful, sometimes eclipsing MOIS, particularly during crises such as the Iran–Iraq War and the internal crackdowns of the 1980s.

The Ideological Turn Here repression is framed not as statecraft alone but as religious duty. The Islamic Republic's security system differed from its predecessor in one crucial respect: ideology. Where SAVAK was a technocratic secret police allied to Western powers, the new intelligence organs saw themselves as instruments of divine will. Khomeini and his allies frequently invoked religious language to justify surveillance, imprisonment, and executions, presenting them as not only necessary for state security but mandated by Islam [4].

Enemies of the revolution were categorised in stark moral terms: "hypocrites" (the Mujahideen-e Khalq, or MEK (Iranian Islamist–Marxist opposition group)), "infidels" (Marxists and secularists), and "agents of imperialism" (monarchists and exiles) [3].

This theological framing gave cover to practices that in substance differed little from SAVAK's — torture, coercion, intimidation — but which were now cast as defending the faith rather than a dynasty. The Reach Beyond Borders Security moved from a domestic shield to an outward-facing sword. From the beginning, Khomeini insisted that the revolution's enemies were not confined to Iran's borders. In fiery sermons he declared that "we shall export our revolution to the world" [4]. Intelligence, in this framework, was not merely defensive but offensive. Dissidents who fled abroad — former ministers, generals, SAVAK officers, secular activists — were considered legitimate targets. Within a year of the revolution, assassination squads linked to Tehran were active in Paris, London, Washington, and beyond [6][7].

Iranian embassies became key hubs in this global campaign. Diplomatic missions often housed intelligence officers under cover, using cultural centres, press offices, and even mosques as fronts [6]

As later court cases in Europe revealed, orders for assassinations often flowed directly from Tehran through diplomatic channels — a strategy that blurred the line between statecraft and terrorism [8].

The Domestic Campaign

Neighbourhood komitehs (Revolutionary neighbourhood committees (1979–81)) and revolutionary courts brought the fight inside Iran's homes and streets. Inside Iran, revolutionary fervour combined with paranoia to

create an unforgiving security state. In 1979–81, revolutionary committees (komitehs) sprang up in every neighbourhood, empowered to arrest, interrogate, and punish suspected counter-revolutionaries [3].

Thousands of monarchists, secular liberals, and leftist guerrillas were rounded up; many were executed after summary trials in makeshift courts. SAVAK's infamous prisons — Evin (Tehran prison notorious for political detainees) in Tehran above all — were repurposed for the revolution. Torture continued much as before: electric shocks, beatings, solitary confinement. What changed was the rhetoric. Prisoners were no longer asked to swear loyalty to the Shah but to confess sins against Islam and the Imam [2][5].

Repression reached a terrible peak in 1988, when several thousand political prisoners — many MEK sympathisers and leftists — were executed on secret orders from the highest levels of government [5][3].

Testimonies of survivors, defectors, and later-released documents exposed how fully the new regime had institutionalised a culture of extermination once associated with SAVAK. Continuity and Rupture Similar tools, different creed — this tension defines the 1980s. The paradox of Iran's post-revolutionary intelligence state was thus clear: in structure and methods it resembled the Shah's SAVAK, but in spirit it proclaimed itself its opposite. Where SAVAK had been denounced as the hand of foreign imperialists, MOIS and the IRGC claimed to be the sword of God. Yet for ordinary Iranians, the midnight knock on the door, the blindfold in a prison cell, and the whispered fear of informants felt hauntingly familiar. [1][5]

This duality — rupture in ideology, continuity in practice — would define the Islamic Republic's intelligence trajectory throughout the 1980s and beyond. From the assassinations of exiles in Paris to the massacres of prisoners in Tehran, the message was the same: the revolution's survival justified any means [3][6][7][8][2][5].

Exporting the Revolution – Assassinations Abroad

Abroad, visibility became vulnerability for exiles long after 1979. The fall of the Shah in 1979 created a flood of exiles: ministers, generals, SAVAK

officials, secular intellectuals, and monarchist activists scattered across Europe, North America, and the Middle East. For Ayatollah Khomeini and his circle, these exiles were not harmless dissidents — they were traitors, "vestiges of the corrupt monarchy," and potential conspirators plotting counter-revolution with the help of the CIA, Mossad, or Saddam Hussein. Eliminating them became a central task of the infant Islamic Republic's security state. What followed was one of the most sustained international assassination campaigns of the late twentieth century. Between 1979 and the mid-1990s, dozens of exiles were targeted abroad, from the boulevards of Paris to the suburbs of Washington, D.C. Many were gunned down at close range or stabbed to death in their homes; others were ambushed on lonely streets or blown up by car bombs. Embassies, consulates, and Iranian cultural centres often served as staging grounds, offering cover identities, safe houses, and logistics [3][6].

The Bakhtiar Assassination Attempts

His survival in 1980 foreshadowed the persistence of plots that ended in 1991. No target symbolised the exiles more than Shapour Bakhtiar, the Shah's final prime minister. Forced into exile after the monarchy's collapse, he became a vocal critic of the Islamic Republic from his base in Paris.

To Khomeini's men, Bakhtiar represented a dangerous combination: nationalist legitimacy, Western visibility, and potential links to counter-revolutionary plots. In July 1980, less than eighteen months after the revolution, a team of Iranian operatives posing as journalists tried to ambush Bakhtiar at his suburban home; a policeman and a neighbour were killed [4].

Bakhtiar survived, but his reprieve was temporary. In August 1991, another team infiltrated his residence and stabbed him to death, a murder widely attributed to Tehran's intelligence services; Europe took note that distance offered no protection from Tehran's reach [3][8].

The Oveissi Killing and Early Campaigns

The message to royalist networks in Europe was unmistakable. Bakhtiar was not the only high-profile exile marked for death. On 7 February 1984,

gunmen in Paris assassinated General Gholam-Ali Oveissi, one of the Shah's most prominent loyalist commanders. The daylight attack underscored Tehran's willingness to act openly even in the heart of Europe [4][5]. Earlier, Shahriar Shafiq — a former Iranian naval officer and the Shah's nephew — had been gunned down in Paris (7 December 1979), signalling from the outset that exile would not guarantee safety [3][7].

Each case bore the hallmarks of coordinated planning, often involving surveillance from Iranian embassies and the use of cover identities [3][9].

The campaign served multiple purposes: silencing critics, deterring would-be defectors, and broadcasting that betrayal of the revolution meant death. Unlike the Shah's secret police, which often preferred intimidation and imprisonment, the Islamic Republic embraced assassination as a deliberate tool of foreign policy [3][7].

Ali Akbar Tabatabai — Terror in Washington

Iran's reach tested the limits of U.S. security on home soil. The boldest early strike came in the United States itself. On 22 July 1980, an American convert to Islam, Daoud Salahuddin (born David Belfield), knocked on the door of former Iranian diplomat Ali Akbar Tabatabai in Bethesda, Maryland. Posing as a postal worker delivering a package, he shot Tabatabai at point-blank range and fled to Iran [10][11]. It was the first known assassination by the Islamic Republic on American soil. While U.S. diplomats were still held hostage in Tehran, the murder illustrated the regime's contempt for U.S. power and its determination to punish enemies wherever they resided [10][11].

The Mykonos Murders and Europe's Wake-Up Call

A courtroom would later pierce the veil of plausible deniability. By the early 1990s, Iranian intelligence operations abroad reached a grim crescendo. In September 1992, gunmen stormed the Mykonos restaurant in Berlin, killing four Iranian-Kurdish opposition leaders at dinner. After a years-long investigation, a German court concluded that the assassinations had been

ordered at the highest levels of the Iranian government, implicating Iran's intelligence minister and, by extension, the Supreme Leader [8].

EU states temporarily recalled their ambassadors in protest — an extraordinary diplomatic rebuke [3][8] — but relations soon resumed, reinforcing Tehran's belief in the value of plausible deniability [3][12].

AMIA (Jewish centre in Buenos Aires bombed in 1994) and the Latin American Front Hezbollah (Lebanese Shi'a militant and political organisation)'s logistics and Iranian direction converged far from the Middle East. Tehran's international operations were not confined to Europe and the U.S. In July 1994, a massive truck bomb destroyed the AMIA Jewish community centre in Buenos Aires, killing 85 and injuring hundreds. Argentine investigators, supported by international intelligence services, traced the attack to Hezbollah operatives acting under the direction of Iranian officials [13].

The AMIA blast followed the 1992 bombing of the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires (29 dead). Argentine judicial filings and later indictments named senior Iranian figures, including officials tied to the IRGC/Quds Force (IRGC external-operations arm) and MOIS, though no senior official faced trial [13][7].

Patterns of Covert Violence

Diplomatic cover and local proxies formed the operational backbone. Across these decades, a consistent pattern emerged. Iranian embassies and cultural centres served as hubs; diplomats often doubled as intelligence officers. Local proxies — radicalised converts, Hezbollah cells, sympathetic militants — carried out the killings. Tehran denied involvement, dismissing accusations as propaganda [3][6][9].

Western intelligence recognised the trend but struggled to respond. A 1987 CIA report noted Iran's "systematic use of diplomatic facilities to instruct operatives abroad" [9].

Strategic considerations — oil, hostages, regional alignments — repeatedly blunted direct confrontation. By the late 1990s, the record of assassinations abroad had created a climate of fear among exiles. The shadow of Mykonos,

the echoes of AMIA, and the memory of Bakhtiar's murder marked Iran as a state willing to kill far beyond its borders.

The Domestic Purges and the 1988 Massacres

The most lethal phase unfolded behind prison walls. While Iranian operatives stalked exiles abroad, the Islamic Republic's intelligence state was equally ruthless at home. From its earliest days, the regime defined legitimacy not through consensus or pluralism, but through the annihilation of perceived enemies. Komitehs, tribunals, and newly minted intelligence organs worked hand-in-hand to cleanse Iran of dissenters. The Shah's prisons were seized in 1979; they now served new masters. Methods of surveillance, coercion, and elimination remained familiar, but the ideological frame shifted: repression was carried out in the name of Islam and the revolution [3][1].

Revolutionary Tribunals and Early Repression Speedy trials created theatre as much as jurisprudence. Immediately after the revolution, revolutionary courts tried former regime officials. Thousands — ministers, generals, SAVAK officers, and rank-and-file personnel — were paraded before clerical judges. Trials often lasted minutes; sentences were predetermined. Public executions at Tehran's Qasr Prison and in city squares sent a blunt message: the revolution was cleansing itself through blood [4].

Among the first executed were Gen. Nematollah Nassiri (former SAVAK chief) and Gen. Mehdi Rahimi (Tehran military governor) — showcased as divine justice against the ancien régime [14]. But tribunals did not stop with royalists; secular liberals, leftists, Kurdish nationalists, and rival Islamists were soon targeted. The MEK Confrontation War with Iraq hardened zero-sum choices against internal foes

The MEK, a hybrid Islamist–Marxist organisation, posed a potent challenge. Once allies against the Shah, they split with the clerical establishment. By 1981, open conflict erupted: MEK militants launched protests and spectacular attacks, including bombings that killed dozens of regime leaders (among them President Mohammad-Ali Rajai and Prime Minister Mohammad-Javad Bahonar) [15].

The response was ferocious. Thousands of suspected sympathisers were rounded up. Guards and komitehs raided safe houses, universities, and workplaces. Amnesty reported that by late 1981, hundreds were being executed monthly, including teenagers [16].

In the crucible of the Iran–Iraq War, MEK's later alignment with Saddam hardened the regime's resolve to eradicate them. The 1988 Massacre Secret 'death committees' turned interrogation into selection for execution. The bloodiest chapter arrived in 1988. After Khomeini accepted a ceasefire with Iraq — likened by him to "drinking the poisoned chalice" — the MEK launched a cross-border incursion from Iraq; it swiftly crushed. Within weeks, prison authorities received secret orders establishing "death committees." Thousands of prisoners were interrogated with a central question: Do you still believe in your organisation? A "yes" often meant death. Many were hanged in groups and buried in unmarked graves [17].

Amnesty and other rights groups estimate that several thousand — often cited as up to 5,000 — were killed within weeks; victims included MEK members and leftists from the Tudeh and Fedayeen [16][17].

An audio recording released years later captured Grand Ayatollah Hossein-Ali Montazeri condemning the killings in a private meeting, warning officials they would be remembered as "the worst criminals in history"; he was sidelined and later placed under house arrest [18].

Chain Murders of the 1990s

The repertoire of intimidation adapted to an intellectual milieu. The culture of political murder did not end in 1988. In the 1990s, a series of "chain murders" targeted intellectuals and dissidents. Victims included Dariush and Parvaneh Forouhar (1998) and writers Mohammad Mokhtari and Mohammad Jafar Pouyandeh. The killings bore marks of professional intelligence tradecraft — surveillance, forced entry, silent execution [12].

Under pressure, President Khatami's government admitted that "rogue elements" in MOIS were responsible; several agents were prosecuted, but accountability remained limited and no senior official faced justice [12][5].

By the turn of the millennium, Iran's intelligence services had perfected dual repression: assassinating enemies abroad while crushing dissent at

home. The 1988 massacre remains a national scar — a reminder that revolutions promising justice can build machinery as ruthless as the tyrannies they replace [16][17][18].

The Intelligence Hydra – MOIS, IRGC, and Factional Struggles

Redundancy reduced coup risk and deepened rivalry. In the 1980s, the intelligence system had crystallised into an overlapping network. Unlike the Shah's single-pillar SAVAK, the revolutionary state built a hydra-headed order. MOIS (1984) stood at the core, but it coexisted — and often competed — with the IRGC's intelligence wing and smaller clerical offices reporting directly to the Supreme Leader [3][6].

The diffusion reflected ideology and mistrust: no faction wanted a monopoly.

SAVAMA to MOIS

Bureaucratising the Revolution Institutionalisation traded improvisation for permanence. In the chaotic early years, SAVAK's remnants were reorganised as SAVAMA — continuity of resources, rupture of purpose. Staffed partly by flipped SAVAK men and inexperienced revolutionaries, it a stopgap. In 1984, the regime institutionalised intelligence under MOIS (Vezarat-e Ettela'at va Amniat-e Keshvar), centralising counter-espionage, domestic surveillance, propaganda, and foreign ops [4].

Unlike SAVAK, MOIS lacked an absolute monopoly; its rise paralleled the Guards' ascent. IRGC's Intelligence Bureau: Soldiers of the Revolution Parallel chains of command guaranteed ideological vigilance. Founded in 1979 to defend the revolution, the IRGC built an intelligence bureau (colloquially Ettela'at-e Sepah). It began by monitoring factions and military dissent, then expanded into student surveillance, prisoner oversight, and external covert ops [3][15].

By the 1990s, it a formidable player; its cadres were implicated in the chain murders and external support to militants [12].

Embedded under the Supreme Leader, the Guards' intel enjoyed latitude and served hardliners wary of MOIS technocrats [3][19].

Clerical Oversight and the Supreme Leader's Office

Clerical channels ensured the Leader was never blind-sided. The Office of the Supreme Leader ran parallel reporting channels via clerical envoys in mosques, seminaries, and cultural bodies. This ensured the Leader was never fully dependent on MOIS or the Guards, it deepened rivalry: competing reports, redundancies, and mutual suspicion [19].

Factional Infighting and Synergy Abroad

Competition at home coexisted with coordination overseas. Pragmatists and reformists tended to cluster in MOIS; hardliners rallied around the Guards. After the chain murders' exposure, MOIS reformists blamed "rogue elements," widely read as Guards/ultraconservatives. Guards commanders accused MOIS of softness against "foreign plots" and "cultural invasion." The struggle was less about efficiency than who defines the revolution's ideological boundaries [12][19].

Abroad, the agencies alternately cooperated and collided. MOIS managed networks in Europe (often via embassies/cultural centres); the Guards' Quds Force directed Hezbollah and other proxies, training militias and developing channels in Lebanon, Iraq, Africa, South America [6][20]. A late-1980s CIA assessment noted that Iran's diffuse structure complicated attribution and enhanced plausible deniability [9].

Despite rivalries, the system's core mission — regime protection — was effective: informers, campus surveillance, labour infiltration, clerical monitoring. Evin remained the symbol of permanence [3][12].

Proxy Warfare – From Beirut to Buenos Aires

Delegated violence achieved reach, leverage, and deniability. If assassination of exiles abroad projected fear, Iran's sponsorship of militant proxies expanded its power far beyond the reach of its own operatives. From the early 1980s, the Islamic Republic pursued a deliberate strategy of cultivating armed groups across the Middle East — not only to defend Iran from hostile neighbours, but also to export its revolutionary ideology and strike adversaries indirectly.

This strategy, later dubbed the "axis of resistance," was incubated in Lebanon's chaos, tested against American and Israeli targets, and ultimately extended as far afield as Latin America [3][20].

The Lebanon Crucible Training in the Bekaa married doctrine to practice. The Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and the Lebanese civil war provided Iran an opportunity and a laboratory. The IRGC dispatched hundreds of Guards to the Bekaa Valley, establishing training camps near Baalbek with Syrian acquiescence. There, they indoctrinated and trained young Lebanese Shi'a militants who would form the core of Hezbollah — the "Party of God." As one Iranian commander boasted, "Lebanon became our forward trench" [20].

Hezbollah soon demonstrated its utility. On 18 April 1983, a suicide bomber drove a van packed with explosives into the U.S. Embassy in Beirut, killing 63 people, including senior CIA officers. Six months later, on 23 October 1983, another bomber struck the U.S. Marine barracks at Beirut airport, killing 241 American servicemen; a near-simultaneous attack killed 58 French paratroopers. Western intelligence quickly traced the operations to Hezbollah, trained and guided by Iran's Revolutionary Guards [21].

Iran denied direct involvement, but its fingerprints were clear. Signals intelligence and later testimony indicated coordination between MOIS, the IRGC, and Hezbollah operatives. For Tehran, the payoff was immense: within months, American and French troops withdrew from Lebanon. As a U.S. intelligence assessment concluded, Iran had discovered that proxy warfare could achieve strategic results unattainable through direct confrontation [22].

HOSTAGE-TAKING AS STATECRAFT

Captivity became bargaining — the grey zone between terror and diplomacy. Throughout the mid-1980s, Hezbollah — with Iranian backing — embarked on a campaign of hostage-taking in Lebanon. Western journalists, professors, and diplomats were kidnapped and held in secret locations, often for years. The most notorious case was that of Terry Anderson, an American Associated Press correspondent held for nearly seven years. These hostages became bargaining chips in Tehran's complex diplomacy

Some were released in exchange for arms or political concessions, as in the convoluted Iran–Contra affair, when U.S. officials secretly sold weapons to Iran in hopes of freeing captives [6].

Others were held to deter Western governments from pressuring Tehran. The strategy blurred the line between terrorism and diplomacy: Iran wielded hostages as both shield and sword. Kuwait and the Gulf Operations in the Gulf tested tools later seen elsewhere. Iran's reach extended into the Gulf. In Dec 1983, coordinated bombings struck the U.S./French embassies and other sites in Kuwait; the al-Da'wa network, closely linked to Iran, was implicated [15].

During the "Tanker War," Iran used deniable means — small boats, mines — to harass shipping, imposing costs while complicating attribution [22]. From Berlin to Buenos Aires By the 1990s, the proxy model operated on multiple continents. By the 1990s, the proxy model had gone global. In March 1992, a suicide bomber destroyed the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires (29 dead). In July 1994, the AMIA centre was devastated (85 dead). Investigations traced both to Hezbollah acting under Iranian direction (MOIS/Quds) [13].

International filings named senior Iranian officials — including Ali Fallahian — though none faced trial [13][8].

THE LOGIC — AND THE INSTRUMENT

- Post-war Iran was too weak for direct fights with the U.S. or Israel. Proxies delivered reach, leverage, and deniability at lower cost [3][22].

- Courts and intel reports occasionally pierced the veil (Mykonos; AMIA), but geopolitics often tempered consequences [8][13].
- By the late 1980s Iran had formalised the Guards' external arm as the Quds Force, later led by Qassem Soleimani, which built and guided networks from Lebanon/Syria to Iraq/Yemen and beyond [3][22][20].
- Western services came to view Quds as small, global, and deeply embedded — winning not only with weapons and money but ideological indoctrination.

The Long Shadow – 2000s and the Entrenchment of the Security State

What began as revolution matured into an everyday system of control. By 2000, the improvised revolutionary apparatus had become a permanent pillar of governance. MOIS and the IRGC sat at the centre, joined by parallel clerical and paramilitary organs. Surveillance and repression were no longer episodic; they were woven into daily life [3][6]. Institutionalising Fear Exposure brought reforms on paper, consolidation in practice. Exposure of the chain murders briefly raised hopes that President Khatami might curb excesses. Hardliner backlash ensured the opposite. By the early 2000s, MOIS tightened controls, the IRGC's intel wing expanded, and the Supreme Leader's office consolidated oversight [19].

Universities remained under watch. The 1999 student protests, triggered by closure of the reformist Salam, were crushed with intel-coordinated raids on dorms. Agents infiltrated civil society, rights groups, and seminaries. "If SAVAK whispered, MOIS listens on loudspeakers," one dissident quipped [12].

The Post-9/11 Environment

Regional wars opened vacuums that Iran moved quickly to fill. After 9/11, Washington labelled Iran part of the "Axis of Evil." Tehran exploited the new context. U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq created vacuums Iran swiftly filled. The Quds Force, under Soleimani, cultivated Iraqi Shia militias; MOIS tracked U.S. operations [22][23]. Domestically, the spectre

of invasion justified tighter surveillance; activists were smeared as foreign "agents" [19][22].

Nuclear Shadows and Assassinations

Counter-moves sparked a clandestine duel of plots and reprisals. As Iran's nuclear programme advanced, a shadow war intensified. Between 2007–2012, at least four Iranian nuclear scientists were assassinated in Tehran — widely attributed to Mossad [24]. MOIS and the IRGC boasted of rolling up "Zionist spy rings." In 2011, U.S. authorities charged Mansour Arbabsiar in a foiled plot to assassinate the Saudi ambassador in Washington via a supposed Mexican cartel intermediary — a case Tehran denied, but which reflected the security services' global ambition [25]

The 2009 Green Movement

The machine met its severest test and held. The severest domestic test came with 2009's presidential election. After Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was declared the landslide winner amid fraud allegations, millions poured into the streets — the Green Movement.

For weeks, protesters filled Tehran's avenues chanting "Where is my vote?" The response was a coordinated crackdown led by MOIS, IRGC intelligence, and the Basij (Paramilitary force under IRGC). Demonstrators were beaten and arrested; detainees later testified to torture, including at Kahrizak detention centre [11].

Unlike the Shah in 1979, Khamenei and commanders retained cohesion; surveillance had already mapped opposition networks; infiltrators sowed division; arrests decapitated leadership. Within months, the movement was suppressed, and the apparatus emerged emboldened [3][11].

By 2010, Iran's intelligence community was a hydra with many heads but a unified purpose: preserve the Islamic Republic. Redundancy ensured survival: if one organ faltered, others compensated [3][19][23]. For ordinary Iranians, omnipresent surveillance — tapped phones, monitored internet, infiltrated gatherings — made fear an everyday certainty.

The trajectory from 1979 to 2009 shows continuity in methods (torture, surveillance, assassinations, proxies) and transformation in scope (from a

single secret police to a sprawling constellation). SAVAK fell quickly in 1979; the Islamic Republic's machine survived crises, adapted, and entrenched itself [3][12].

Conclusion – The Legacy of Khomeini's Spies

From the storming of SAVAK in 1979 to the crackdown on the Green Movement three decades later, the intelligence journey reveals rupture and continuity. SAVAK's files were exposed, its officers executed or exiled, and its name cursed. Yet its practices — surveillance, torture, censorship, covert operations — were repurposed, justified by a new ideology, and institutionalised on a broader scale. Continuity in Method, Rupture in Ideology. The Shah's SAVAK claimed to preserve modernisation and monarchy; Khomeini's MOIS and the IRGC claimed to defend Islam and revolution.

For victims — dissidents in Evin, Kurdish leaders gunned down in Berlin, families of the executed in 1988 — the experience differed little. Only the rhetoric changed [3][6].

Internationalising Repression

Where SAVAK focused mainly at home, Khomeini's spies globalised the struggle. Dissidents in Paris, Washington, or Buenos Aires learned that distance did not equal safety. Mykonos and AMIA showed a state whose covert reach rivalled and often defied international norms [6][8][13].

The Hydra of Power

Dispersing authority across MOIS, the IRGC, and clerical offices created resilience. The system absorbed shocks — chain murders exposure, the Green Movement — without collapse. Unlike SAVAK, dismantled overnight in 1979, Khomeini's hydra became systemic, embedded in ideology, bureaucracy, and military force [3][19].

A Culture of Fear

Perhaps the most enduring legacy is cultural: fear became ordinary. Families whispered, students coded speech, journalists self-censored, neighbours suspected neighbours. The revolution that promised a voice produced new silences [12]

Lessons:

→ Repression sustains but corrodes
→ Ideology repackages tyranny.
→ Externalisation extends survival.
→ Resilience breeds entrenchment.

Multiple agencies turned intelligence from a ruler's tool into an organ of the regime itself [3][6][19].

By 2009, Iran's intelligence services were permanent guardians of the regime and political actors shaping domestic and international confrontations. Their story is one of transformation: from hunted revolutionaries to hunters; from victims of SAVAK to architects of a security state feared as much as its predecessor. In the next chapter, the lens widens: Chapter 3 tracks how regional wars and transnational networks reshaped intelligence tradecraft across the 1980s.

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